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ABSTRACT

This speech explains education voucher programs and responds to criticisms of such programs. The education voucher system is described as one that questions traditional structures and methods while it equalizes opportunities to purchase education, fosters federally funded and controlled alternative school settings and programs, and gives parents control of a share of public resources for their children's education. Variations of the basic proposal provide supplemental vouchers for preschool education, education of the poor, reading education, and special programs for high school dropouts. According to the author, opposition by public school officials to proposed voucher experiments demonstrates the need for these spokesmen to respond with constructive reorganizations of their own. (EA)

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EDUCATION ANSWERS THAT VOUCHERS QUESTION

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Education Answers that Vouchers Question

Introductory Remarks

It is my understanding that most of you have already made up your minds about the possible value of education vouchers, and that you are strongly opposed to the idea. A poll reported in the American School Boards Journal a few months ago indicated that the majority of school board members were strenuously opposed to education vouchers. And NSBA is a member of the "study group" organized by NEA and AFT--can you think of more than one other venture these two antagonists have been in agreement on?--to halt OEO's effort to conduct a voucher experiment.

Having characterized you in this sweeping fashion, you have the right to ask about my intention in agreeing to speak to you.

In these brief remarks and in the discussion period to follow I intend to try to challenge your belief that the voucher system is a sinister mechanism designed by the enemies of public education. While you may not wish to change your minds about education vouchers, I intend that many of you will establish your positions on sounder arguments than those revealed in the poll mentioned above. I intend that some of you will recognize that in your haste to oppose the idea of vouchers you have overlooked some considerations about American education that are much more important than whether or not a voucher system is introduced. Finally, I intend that a few of you will conclude that voucherhood, like childhood, is neither good nor bad, it is simply appropriate or inappropriate.

In preparation for our discussion tonight I have read everything that has been written about vouchers in the last six months, attended three conferences on education vouchers and ghosted a speech for a fourth, and talked with three officials at OEO. I offer the evidence of having done my homework not for your admiration, but for your sympathy. For some reason, the most exciting idea in education today has stimulated production of the most oppressingly dull writing and clinics. How much fun can it be to be constantly probing the question of whether education vouchers will produce reform or catastrophe? Peril or panacea? Solution or sop? It is not any fun. The experience has led me to some observations, however, which I will use to structure my remarks into three sections.

First, it is understandably the case that few other people have had reason to read what has been written about vouchers and therefore many people are very concerned about voucher systems that noone has proposed. Our official program contains a great deal of misinformation in just a few sentences (in addition to an absolutely incredible title). Consequently, the first of my comments will be directed at correcting some common misunderstandings about voucher systems.

The major section of my remarks is directed at what I have come to regard as the fox-hole mentality of educators as they seek to defend themselves from criticism. As suggested in my title, I believe the importance of the voucher idea lies in its power to question, to hold up for inspection and evaluation, many of the answers our system has proposed as acceptable

solutions to education problems.

There is not just one voucher system being proposed, but many. Some of these proposals seem to be especially appropriate for consideration by school board members today, and I will conclude by discussing some of the uses of vouchers at the productive margin of the education system.

What the Voucher System Is Not

There are a number of fears or hopes that recur frequently in discussions about education vouchers. In the interest of brevity, five of these ideas are discussed in a cursory manner.

1. Contrary to our program notes, there are no voucher systems such as proposed by OEO in operation "right now". In fact, only three cities have pre-planning grants and only the most optimistic at OEO imagine starting up before Fall of 1973.

2. No responsible person has proposed an unregulated voucher system since Milton Freedman introduced the idea over ten years ago. Christopher Jencks has written that an unregulated voucher plan would be worse for children than no voucher plan at all.

3. The Federal contribution to a school system experimenting with vouchers would not include the cost of educating the child. That is, the school system will still be expected to expend public funds for the education of children. OEO will pay for administrative and other costs associated with the program.

4. The voucher concept does not increase the threat of Federal domination of education. At last report, OEO declared that it would not consider accepting a school system as a participant

in its experiment unless the board, the Mayor, the Governor, and the Chief State School Officer all approved of the idea.

5. The voucher system will cost no less, perhaps a little more, than conventional systems of education. It is not an economy measure.

You may wish to return to these points in our discussion. In summary, it seems clear that school systems, such as Alum Rock (San Jose), Seattle, or Gary, does not investigate a voucher system because it will save them money. They do not do so because the Federal Government will provide for the cost of educating their children. These systems apparently think there is some educationally sound reason to investigate this fundamental restructuring of education. What do they have in mind?

Education Answers that Vouchers Question

We have now had public education for two hundred years in our country. Over this time we have developed a system which has answered the basic questions of governmental control of education. The voucher system grows directly out of the frustration of many in dealing with the education system we have developed. The voucher system questions, confronts, challenges, the answers we have provided about education. We need to examine some of our now traditional answers if we are to understand and benefit from the voucher concept.

For example, our answer to the problem of providing a system for distribution of the resources of education--money, people and ideas--that was politically viable is now quite obvious. We have designed a public school system which distributes the bulk of the resources to those with greatest political power, the leavings for the powerless. The mechanism for making this determination of who gets what encompasses all levels of government. The state has refused to use its authority to reconstitute school system boundaries so that the economic resources of its citizens are equalized. Consequently, we have a ring of affluence around every rotting urban education system and the resources of all the public are not utilized to provide quality education for all. Rather, they provide quality education for favored Americans, inferior education for unfavored Americans.

Moreover, our answer to the problem of collecting and distributing resources for education is one which encompasses total denial of equality of opportunity for persons who, by "accident of birth" happen to be born in a poor state.

May I cite three pieces of evidence to support these assertions:

1. We now know that the quality of education a child receives in the public schools varies according to the section of the school district in which he resides. (Hobson v. Hanson in D.C. proved that education resources--services, curriculum, teachers, and dollars--varied within the District and that the controlling factor was the affluence of the section of the city).

2. We now know that the quality of education a child receives in the public schools varies according to the school district in which he lives. We know that the within-state variations of education expenditures often are greater than between-state variations.

Two cases now before State Supreme Courts in California and Michigan have argued that our answer to the problem of distributing education resources has been so unequal, the effects on children so harmful, that the system should be declared unconstitutional as denied of equal protection. (Detroit v. Michigan, Serrano v. Priest.)

3. A recent NCSPS publication makes the following observation: the difference in expenditure between the education purchased for one of our pupils in New York and Alabama is about $1,000.

A voucher system would provide every parent with the same opportunity to purchase education for his child, or would increase the relative opportunity of poor parents to purchase quality education. We may want to dismiss the voucher idea. But if the American Dream for an open society is to be any

more than hypocrisy, we must address ourselves effectively and immediately to the obvious iniquities, the obvious class determinate structure which we reinforce with our present system of distribution of resources in public education. If a voucher system is not the solution to this enormously unjust and indefensible situation, we are responsible for proposing a better answer.

In our system we have developed an answer to the basic education question of how learning takes place. Our answer, developed over many years with the help of professors, teachers and superintendents associations, and school board member conferences, is as follows: learning is best accomplished in school buildings in groups of thirty or fewer students with the assistance of a fully certified teacher and a state approved text-book. If you will continue to flesh out our answer to the fundamental question of how we try to facilitate learning in our public schools the entire enterprise becomes laughable. I am saying that there are no alternatives in our public schools and that our much praised local control has resulted in a dreary sameness (Silberman) that would not be tolerated by a fully centralized system. And all the wordy new innovations being discussed at this conference, even if they are in existence two years from now, will not affect even one percent of our children. Our answer is that education means one full, certified teacher, thirty children, and a state-approved text-book.

The voucher system is proposed to foster publicly funded and publicly controlled alternative school settings and programs. If we do not believe the voucher system can accomplish this goal then we are responsible for proposing strategies that will provide alternative systems or sub-systems. How long have we talked about differentiated staffing? How long have we been

introducing pilot projects that turn out to be terminal projects? What major changes have come out of ES 70, or regional laboratories? The voucher system questions both our assertion that we don't need alternatives and our false hope that we will be able to change our system by experimentation with new curricula and minor tinkering.

In the process of developing our public education system we have necessarily developed a mechanism for control. Our answer to the problem of control has been to assert that teachers, principals, superintendents, state departments of education, legislators, governors, and, to a much smaller extent, school board members control education. Our answer is that the opportunity of parents to directly influence the education opportunities of their children is best minimized and the opportunity of students to control their education is to be avoided. One of our most cherished myths is that public education is controlled by the public. Can you, even as a board member, influence the education processes characteristic of your child's school? Can you, even as a board member, assure that only teachers who believe your child can learn are responsible for his education?

Parents, unless they have the capability to buy private education for their children have no capability to select curriculum, teachers, environment, or classmates. Parents are reduced to angry frustration, often tears, in fighting for a decent education for their own and other children in our cities. The system, and your organization is a part of this, has systematically precluded meaningful parent participation in any aspect of their child's education.

NCSPS was recently an actor in an absurd drama in which the then acting

Commissioner of Education, the NSBA, the teachers and administrators associations were cast against those public interest groups advocating mandatory parent councils for Title I of ESEA. Your organization claimed it would produce chaos to have the poor parents given full information about Title I projects, or to allow them to directly influence the programs designed to assist their children.

While our answer to control of education has been to exclude parents, the voucher system has challenged our apparent belief that they should not have control of their children's education. Voucher systems propose that parents be given absolute control of expenditure of their share of public resources available for education of their children. If we don't believe the voucher system will succeed in dramatically increasing parents control over their children's education, then we have the responsibility of developing and implementing a system that will do so. It is easy to understand why teachers and administrators do not wish to be accountable to the public. It is not easy to understand why school board members have joined the professionals in excluding the public from control of education.

Vouchers and New Opportunities for Effective Education

Most have examined the voucher concept as a means of restructuring the existing education system. Recently, however, several plans for using vouchers in addition to the regular system have been proposed. In these instances it is claimed that the voucher concept is an especially appropriate mechanism for insuring development and support of effective programs. These plans would exist alongside the regular public school system and, because they do offer some hope for helping us solve our more difficult education problems, should be of great interest to board members.

Perhaps the most popular of these schemes is to use a voucher or vendor system to stimulate new approaches to early childhood education. Some, including the National Urban Coalition, believe that a vendor system is especially useful in prompting creation of new programs for which the existing systems can not be expected to respond rapidly. It would be most unfortunate if early childhood education were to become an extension of our present kindergarten systems.

One interesting variation of this plan would include discontinuing the last year of high school and using those resources to provide a year, or more, of pre-school education through a vendor system. A second variation would provide vouchers just for the poor in order to give them a better chance to secure an equal educational opportunity when they arrive at the traditional school.

Some have advocated that vouchers be provided the poor to enable them to supplement their traditional education program with after-school and weekend enrichment activities.

Another proposal for use of vouchers in conjunction with the regular school system is in the area of reading. It is time we admit that we simply

can't teach some children to read in schools. Vouchers provided for reading education might be expected to produce new approaches and processes that would succeed with those children we are now unable to help. Given our failure in this most basic education skill we surely should be willing to try a different approach. Teachers say that if they were "freed" from the burdens of the system, could change the environment of their classes, they could also succeed. Perhaps. But the responsibility of boardmen is to insure that every child learns to read every year. If some children cannot learn by our methods in our schools, we had better provide different methods and different settings. Modified voucher programs of this type can help you meet your responsibility.

For the same reasons, why don't we use vouchers to provide more appropriate education experiences for high school drop-outs? It is certainly true that most students succeed in our schools. But it is also true that many do not succeed. It seems reasonable to expect that in another setting, perhaps a more informal setting, perhaps a more rigorously structured setting, that they might succeed. As board members responsible, not for the failure, but for the success of students, why would you not wish to use the voucher or vendor system of payment to provide these opportunities?

I have tried to address the topic of education vouchers in a manner that I believed would be challenging to you. I mentioned a few misconceptions about vouchers (I spoke at some length about the education answers that vouchers question) and I talked just a bit about the potential of voucher systems for assisting school board members to meet their responsibilities.

I have also tried to present a somewhat different perspective on the relationship of education vouchers to the growing public disenchantment with our favorite institution. In conclusion I would like to indicate my support for a characterization authored by David Selden, President of the AFT. He says that: "Like a bright, shining, quick-moving lizard running over a rotting log, the voucher scheme diverts our attention from the decay underneath".

He is right. We have responded to the crisis of confidence in public education by attacking the symptom rather than the causes of decaying public confidence. The special magic of education vouchers is that they offer hope to a society that increasingly doubts the capability of traditional education structures and methods for educating their children, and increasingly mistrusts the motives of those responsible for operation of the public schools. Those of us who would see the institution prosper should address ourselves to attending the causes of despair rather than do battle with the proposed voucher experiment.

Fred M. Hechinger, as always, has the last word: "The crisis that has resulted from the failure of public education to respond to new demands is obviously real. Public school spokesmen cannot afford simply to attack and reject the voucher proposal because it threatens the existing system. Their only persuasive answer and defense might well be to come up with a reorganization of their own that makes the schools a far more effective testing ground of new ideas".

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